

The power of clothing in Kachin State

MYIKTYINA, Myanmar, February 6 (UNHCR) – Since the ceasefire between the Government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) broke down two years ago, continuous sporadic conflict and tentative peace efforts in Kachin State have left 100,000 internally displaced persons heavily reliant on humanitarian assistance and in a precarious situation, scattered in over 160 camps across the State.

Through a unique deployment scheme with UNHCR, UNIQLO (the fourth largest casual clothes company worldwide), sent two deployees to visit the Kachin State capital, Myitkyina, to visit outlying IDP camps.

This is not as out of the ordinary as it might sound at first. UNIQLO has been a unique partner with UNHCR in what the clothing giant likes to call ‘the power of clothing’, since 2006. The company has been supporting UNHCR’s operations worldwide, providing some 5 million items of clothing to displaced people in more than 25 countries.

Kanako and Yuka, two UNIQLO employees serving as deployees with UNHCR for a six month period, were chosen to visit Kachin to experience life in an IDP site and to explore the challenges that women face, including their clothing needs.

In Kachin State, recycled clothes are often the only type of clothes that IDPs can afford to buy. An IDP woman explains that she can only afford to buy clothes once a year: “If we work as day labourers, we can make some 4,000 kyats (equivalent to US \$4.00) a day. At the market we can buy second hand clothes, where each piece costs 500 kyats (US \$0.50)”.

Enthusiastic about the samples of clothes donated by the Japanese public, during a short presentation on the UNHCR/UNIQLO partnership, one IDP woman says, “If you can provide us with such good quality items, we will be very happy”.

As the lead organisation for protection, shelter, non-food items (NFIs), camp coordination and camp management, UNHCR, under the inter-agency response to the Kachin emergency, has been working with the Government of Myanmar to meet the most pressing needs of IDPs.

UNHCR has been able to provide some items as part of complementary and hygiene kits, but this is a modest contribution towards the overall needs. There has also been distribution of clothes, mostly second-hand by individuals, charities and sometimes by the Government, but they don’t meet the needs of all IDPs.

All the women the UNIQLO deployees met reported leaving most of their belongings and clothes behind when they fled by bike, tuk-tuk, motorcycle or

car. “Some of us even had no choice than to leave by foot. As we heard the gunshots we escaped, carrying a couple of sets of clothes in our bags...” recalls a woman.

“What we are wearing is what we brought from home. When we left we took some things with us, but not so many items as we didn’t think it would take so long before we could return to our villages” adds another woman.

After more than two years since the start of the conflict, many camp residents are feeling restless regarding their situation. Many IDPs suffer from stress and depression because they don’t know what their future will bring. Adding to their fears are the worries about their present everyday needs. Some IDPs can find work, but not all. Some, despite having freedom of movement, are not able to find work or sustain a living.

Despite the difficult conditions they face in camps, the women who are often looking after the whole family, with many husbands leaving in search of work. They are very motivated to learn new skills, improve their livelihoods, and support their children’s education.

Most of the women the UNIQLO deployees met used to be farmers in their villages of origin. Now they don’t have access to land and don’t have enough space to raise animals. “My eyesight is not good enough to do tailoring or similar activities” shares an elderly woman, “I would like to do pig-raising but there is not enough place in the camp”.

UNHCR is raising awareness about the need for durable solutions in Kachin State among the different actors. While conditions are not conducive yet for returns, for example, UNHCR hopes to raise awareness of the needs and necessary conditions for people to be able to make voluntary choices about their futures in safe and dignified way.

Reflecting on the distance between Japan and the IDP camps around Myitkyina, Kanako is struck by the aspects of daily life that remain the same. She sees the need for clothing as a good example of a common universal necessity. “I joined this internship because I wanted to understand realities that might seemingly be very far from mine, but where I might also be able to bring something positive and help to the people” she says.

The two UNIQLO deployees left Myitkyina determined to help raise awareness within UNIQLO and Japan about the people they met and the situation of displaced people in Kachin State. They will also bring their assessment of the needs in Kachin back to Tokyo to reflect on the potential for a clothes distribution sometime in the future.

By Medea Savary, Myanmar